The Beat

Music & Young People

a visit with Wynton Marsalis

by Danny McCue

THERE AREN'T a great many quiet moments in Wynton Marsalis' apartment high above Lincoln Center.

To begin with, there are the people who share his life. On this particular afternoon they include a sassy housekeeper who greets a visitor with "Hi, I'm fat. How Are you?" and his younger brother, the musician/record producer Delfeayo Marsalis, who has come — handshakes and high fives all around — to spend the night.

Then there are the three phones, one or another of which seems to ring every few minutes.

"This is a circus," laughs the man reputed to be the most serious-minded member of the musical Marsalis clan. But as he continues to talk — making frequent allusions to family and community — it's impossible to imagine he'd have it any other way.

At thirty-one, Wynton Marsalis has served as artistic director of Jazz At Lincoln Center, a year-round program of performances, lectures, and educational workshops, for five years. Earlier this season, its second with a full schedule, he launched the Young People's Concert Series, which he also hosts. Modeled on the programs Leonard Bernstein pioneered in the 1950's with the New York Philharmonic, the monthly performances are designed to introduce children to basic musical concepts, in the process shoring up jazz's place in our cultural heritage.

"I've always done workshops for kids," says Marsalis, whose commitment to teaching began while still in high school, "because it's another way to have an impact on the life of the community, on city life."

By his own estimate, he's visited over 700 schools since he first came north to study at Juilliard fourteen years ago. Because his father was a well-known musician and teacher in his hometown of New Orleans, he admits "it's like I grew up in a music workshop."

Seated at a modest dining room table — a homey touch in a space that derives much of its personality from the presence of a grand piano and a sweeping view of midtown Manhattan to the south and the Hudson River, with New Jersey beyond it, to the west — he impulsively fingers the valves of a trumpet as he parries an hour's worth of questions. Not the least of which is whether there's even more to these Young People's Concerts than meets the eye.

"Well, you know, I never just teach music. I always teach things, the ways that music relates to life. Like with this last one I did, about form. To teach somebody about form, I tell them to put their hand right up to their face and look at it. Based solely on what they can see, they can't tell what it is. Now, when they pull their hand back, they can clearly see it's a hand. So that's the first thing — in order to see the form, you have to have enough distance, enough of an overview.

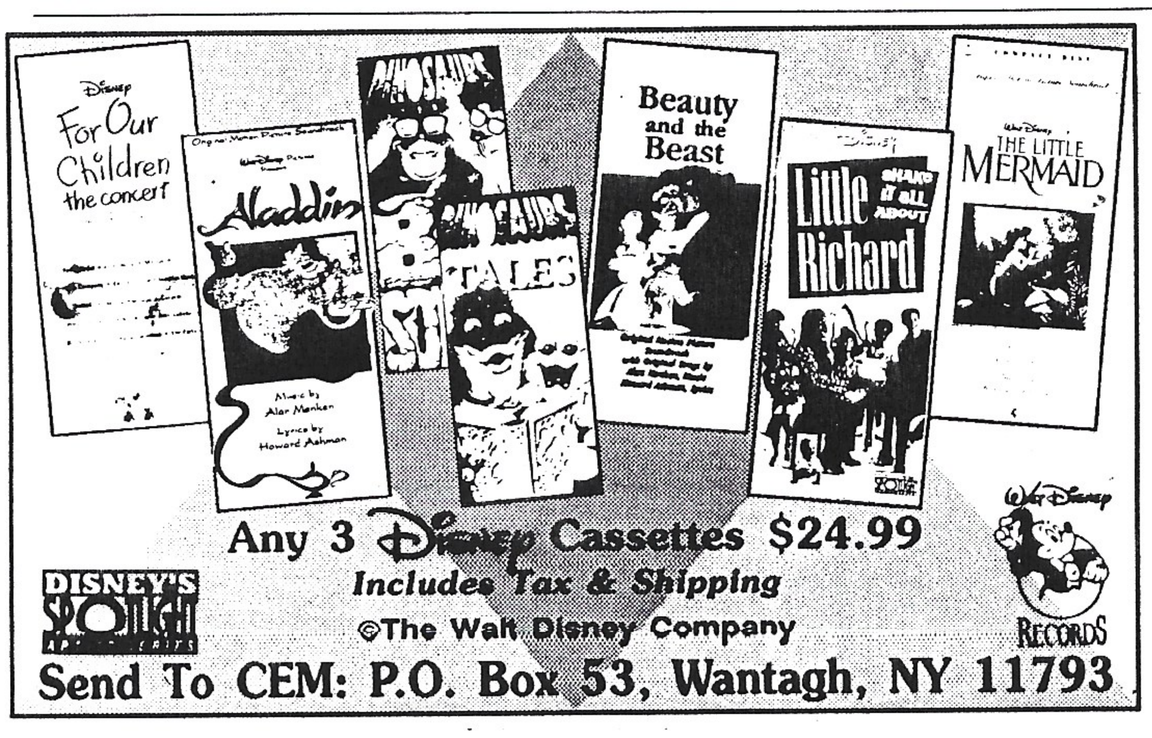
"Then I'll tell them about perceiving a musical form. Now, a musical form is not like a physical form, because a musical form unfolds. It's like a story. So I'll say to kids, 'You know how you sit in your room at night and your parents are telling you a bedtime story? You get really lost in the characters, you have to really concentrate to remember where the monster was going, who the king was, where the princess was, and then, as it unfolds, you kind of start to figure out what's going to happen. Music is the same way. Your ability to teach it is really just based on your ability to perceive its connection to other things in the world."

Marsalis pauses a moment, then gets up to retrieve two cups of tea. "I'm still learning how to do it," he says, coming back to the table. "Because there are millions of ways to communicate things to people. Like, there is a way to communicate spiritual things to kids. There is a way to do it. Now, the question is, do you know how to do it? That's my goal as a teacher: to figure out how to communicate profound things very simply."

Though often likened to the Leonard Bernstein conducted concerts of the same name, the two are actually very dissimilar. In part this is because of the different musical genres they are based on — jazz being more about interaction — and also because Bernstein's were shown on television and he had those production values to take into consideration. The biggest difference in Marsalis' eyes however, is that he can't make the same assumptions about broad musical knowledge that Bernstein did thirty-five years ago.

"Like he'd say, 'We've all heard *Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.*' Tell that to a group of kids today (laughs). I can't do that. The thing is, I don't blame the kids. Because once popular music became overwhelmingly popular, much more than it ever should have, based on what it was, that gave the public the idea that everything in music is as trivial as the pop music they hear on the radio. So the question in their minds is 'Why should we know this?'

"All of education has been undermined through the mass media. All of education, not just music. Because there's a belief that to be intellectual is to be a nerd, and that to be hip you have to be loud, ignorant, anti-social, you have to rebel against something — Lord knows what you're rebelling against. I guess you have to rebel against being middle class. So part of our job is to let people see that



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it's hip to be part of a community, that it's hip to participate in the acquisition of knowledge. But see, after twenty or thirty years of being told that being vulgar is cool, I mean, you know, you can't act like that hasn't had an effect."

To find the roots of such an attitude, one need only look as far as Marsalis' early home life, and to the guiding hand of his father, Ellis.

"I remember once, I was going through that teenage thing... and he said, 'Man, I don't want to hold you back. As a matter of fact, I want you to get out of my house. That's what I want you to do. See, you want to have a rebellion, and you want me to pay for that.'

"My Daddy," Marsalis laughs, shaking his head, "he was way too hip to rebel against. He would make you deal with what you were doing. From the time I was a kid he would say, 'Son, learn how to work a job.' I was nine or ten and he would say, 'Don't come to me asking for stuff that you can get yourself. Go get a job: cut lawns, throw papers, shag bottles, whatever you have to do. Because when you become a man, knowing how to work a job is very important.' Somebody like my father, he didn't give you room to rebel. I mean, he's a jazz musician; you weren't going to be hipper than him. You weren't going to be smarter, you weren't going to outcurse him. You couldn't get to nothing that was too hip for him not to be hipper than. He'd win the arguments in the barber shop every week, he could teach you how to catch a baseball on one hop... Man, I wanted to be like my Daddy so bad... "

> "The thing about making them practice is, just make them practice everyday. It can be for ten minutes, it can be for five minutes. Just so long as its every day. That's the thing."

It was a practical education. The one area he doesn't remember being pushed in was music. "It's like I tell parents all the time. If they have a kid who they want to play music, I say, whatever you do, if you have a child that's younger than twelve or thirteen, don't make them sit down for an hour a day to practice. Because an hour to an eight-year-old is like five hours. A lot of times parents over-tax kids. The thing about making them practice is, just make them practice everyday. It can be for ten minutes, it can be for five minutes. Just so long as its everyday. That's the thing. So they can get into the whole conception of routine. So that they can see how they're developing, just over a slower amount of time. 'Go practice this for thirty minutes!' That's like giving them Castor Oil."

Though he's done nothing to push it, Marsalis' own two sons, ages four and two, already seem to have caught the family bug. "They'll walk around the house and go, 'Hey, let's play some jazz blues,'" he says with pride. "Now I didn't teach them that. It's just something that they do."

"Yeah, I love kids," he says, moving on from fatherly revelry to make a point. "So the first thing is, if you're going to be a good teacher, you have to have love. I can teach any kids, man... I can go to the roughest school in the inner city and I'll teach them and they'll learn, because that's how my father was. That's what I come from. I can go to the most suburban school and teach them too, because a lot of teaching is about love."

This summer, Marsalis, who is as well-versed in the classical repertoire as he is in jazz, is doing a television special for children with the Boston Symphony. In it he intends to analyze the first movement of *Beethoven's Third Symphony*. "I would like to do that kind of show regularly," he says. "Things will come. But I'm not in a hurry. There's a lot to do."

In the meantime. "This is for the community. I'm a community worker. I grew up in New Orleans, I like the feeling of community. I don't mind kids hollering and screaming while I'm talking. I grew up with that. I want to create an environment where, just the fact that they're there, they'll learn something. Even if it's just that the blues are a twelve bar form. Even if it's that the choruses are like the floors of a skyscraper -- and they'll hear some music. One thing we, meaning all the guys in the band, agree on is that when we play at these shows, we really play."

As the interview winds down, Marsalis puts down the trumpet for the first time. After leaving the room for a moment, he reemerges with a football, which we proceed to toss back and forth.

"I'm here to play music and to enrich people's lives as a musician," he says. "I'm not impressed by money, I'm not impressed by awards; I'm impressed by seeing young students learn how to play, and by writing music that sounds good, by seeing growth, and by being a part of the world. I'm not interested in vulgarity. I don't want to be part of no clique. I don't want musicians who are just starting out to worship me. I'm just a jazz musician, like my Daddy is. That's all."